

LEGEND: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald. By Edward Jay Epstein. McGraw-Hill. 382 pp. \$12.95.

AARON LATHAM

This may be nothing, but . . .

The high-ranking Russian who recently defected to the United States resembles in many ways a spy code-named Fedora. The recent defector was the Soviet Union's top diplomat at the United Nations. Fedora was a KGB officer, working under diplomatic cover at the U.N., who passed Soviet secrets to the FBI. The defector's name, which has been in a lot of headlines lately, is Arkady Shevchenko. One wonders if his defection had anything to do with the publication of a new book, which tells the story of a spy, whom J. Edgar Hoover liked so much he named him after a hat. Hoover loved hats.

The book is Edward Jay Epstein's *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*, which is fascinating and definitely should be read. Fedora fits into the Oswald saga in a rather complicated way. Shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a Russian defector named Yuri Nosenko came to the United States with a critically important story to tell. He claimed to know that Oswald had never been recruited by the KGB. Some members of the American intelligence community thought the defector might be a phony: a "disinformation agent." But Fedora vouched for him. Which made some CIA officers wonder if the FBI's spy might not be a disinformation agent, too. Fedora developed a dent in his credibility.

At the time of the Kennedy assassination, Fedora was already in place at the U.N. spying for the FBI. Coincidentally, Arkady Shevchenko, the defector in the news these days, came to the U.N. in 1963. . . .

The speculation in which I have indulged above is not unlike the speculation in which Epstein indulges in *Legend*. By which I mean that Epstein's style is to lay out provocative evidence

Aaron Latham is the author of *Orchids for Mother* (Little-Brown), a spy novel, and is an editor of *Esquire*.

THE NATION/April 29, 1978 P.509

Under Several Hats

NATION
29 APR 78

but not to draw any final conclusions. He suggests that everyone from Lee Harvey Oswald to former CIA Director William Colby may have been Soviet agents, but he leaves it at maybe. Whatever personal opinions he may have—what he really believes—he keeps under his fedora.

Edward Jay Epstein's book reads the way James Jesus Angleton's mind works. Angleton ran the Counter-Intelligence Department at the Central Intelligence Agency for a generation. It was his job to be the most suspicious man in America. He saw as many Russian spies around him as Howard Hughes saw germs.

Angleton's great loves are constructing elaborate conspiracy theories and growing rare orchids. I happen to know this because I once studied his career in conjunction with writing a novel about an orchid-loving spy. The only other orchid enthusiast I know is Ed Epstein. This is no coincidence. Angleton infected Epstein with a love of growing the exotic flower. In a sense, Angleton taught Epstein how to think and how to pollinate.

Actually, Angleton was only one of many anonymous sources to whom Epstein talked. He interviewed everyone from Richard Helms to former Marines who served with Oswald in Japan. And yet Angleton's point of view fills the book just as orchids now fill Epstein's New York apartment.

In *Legend*, Epstein quotes Angleton as follows: "In the field of intelligence, a legend is an operational plan for a cover, or a cover itself, depending on the mission." The implication of the title is that Oswald might have been living a legend at the time he shot Kennedy. In 1959, Oswald defected to the USSR, but three years later he returned to the United States, supposedly disillusioned with Soviet oppression. *Legend* raises the possibility that Oswald might have returned not at all disillusioned but as a committed Soviet agent.

James Jesus Angleton would naturally believe this. A measure of his paranoia is his firm belief that there is no Sino-Soviet split—that Moscow and Peking are only pretending to argue so we will lower our guard. In other words, Angleton believes that the entire Soviet foreign policy is a legend. And he believes China's foreign policy

is a legend, too. If Angleton were right, this would be the largest conspiracy, involving the most people, that ever took place in the history of the world. A mind capable of swallowing such a large conspiracy would have no trouble at all digesting the supposed Oswald conspiracy.

So nothing is more natural than for Angleton to believe that the Russians sent Oswald home to America with a mission. That mission may not have been to kill Kennedy. He may have ad-libbed the assassination. Or he may have done it for the Cubans. But Angleton would be sure that he must have had some mission.

A corollary to this theory is: any agent who says Oswald wasn't a spy must be a double agent himself. So Nosenko must be a double agent. And Fedora must be a double, too. And former CIA Director William Colby, who sided with Nosenko, must be. . . .

Angleton has hated Colby for many years. It's mutual. They carried on their feud for almost a generation within the secret world of the CIA. And now they have transformed their secret political feud into a public literary feud. Angleton, via Epstein, has fired *Legend* at Colby. And in a few weeks, Colby will fire his own book, *Honorable Men*, back at Angleton.

At the end of *Legend*, then Director Colby fires Angleton and "purges" all the other people who distrusted Nosenko. And he hires Nosenko as a consultant to the new counterintelligence staff. If Angleton's view is correct, then this particular personnel move ranks with Britain's putting Kim Philby in charge of the Soviet section of MI6. The book closes on this picture: the double agents would seem to have finally inherited the Central Intelligence Agency.

In William Colby's soon-to-be-published memoir, he countercharges that Angleton emasculated the agency by trying to discredit practically all its spies. Colby says Angleton aborted operation after operation by claiming they were infiltrated with double agents. When Colby ran the Saigon station, he went so far as to exclude Angleton from all his operations. In Angleton's defense, it must be pointed out that our intelligence operation in Vietnam

was saturated with double agents. Still you can be too afraid of doubles just as you can be too afraid of germs: an intelligence agency cannot live like Howard Hughes.

The Angleton-Colby feud transcends the personal. Their argument about double agents is really an argument about how much we should trust the Russians. Which means that it is also an argument over whether the cold war is over. Colby would say that it is. Angleton believes that the Russians are just pretending that it is. He would say

that the end of the cold war is just another Russian legend. Angleton naturally sees *Legend* as a shot aimed at getting the cold war going again.

But one should never forget to be suspicious of a man as suspicious as Angleton. Anyone who spends that much time worrying about Russian disinformation might not be above countering with some American disinformation of his own. In *Legend*, our old friend Nosenko is quoted as saying, "A legend is a false biography." In the end, I am left wondering which better fits this definition: Oswald's legend or *Legend* itself. □

155